


Student Academic Support

Find us on level 2 of the library.
Appointments available or drop by for quick questions,
Mondays to Fridays, 10am to 4pm.
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<http://www.abertay.ac.uk/studying/support/academic>

At Abertay:
Visit Student Services on level 2 of the library, including:
English as a foreign language:
Amanda Shaw - a.shaw@abertay.ac.uk.
Advice for disabled students:
Claire Allan - c.allan@abertay.ac.uk.

Want more?
Other guides available on Blackboard from Student Academic Support that you might find useful:
• Getting started with coursework.
• Effective research.
• Critical reading.
• Checking your work.

Online:
• **LearnHigher** is a great starting point, full of excellent resources to develop all aspects of your approach to learning - including printable timetables, coursework planners, and more.
<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/students.htm>
• **University of Toronto:** good overview of essay writing.
<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/advise.html>.
• **University of Wales:** advice for students who may have difficulty with conventional approaches to essay planning and writing.
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Modules/writes.html>.
• **University of New South Wales:** step-by-step procedure for writing an essay.
<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/Essay.html>.



Writing essays

Student Academic Support

The main points

The first thing you should do when writing an essay answer is to work out what the essay question is asking you to do.

When researching an essay you will require both descriptive information and critical analysis to answer the question.

Take time before writing to plan the structure of your essay. Think about how to help your reader to understand your argument by guiding them from point to point in a logical order.

Remember to allow enough time to check your work once you have finished writing before you hand it in.

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How good are you at the moment?

Do you know what an academic essay written at university level is and how it differs from an essay at school or college?
Yes: You know the differences between an academic essay and an essay at school or college and understand that the academic essay requires more than basic description of a topic, with in-depth research and critical analysis.
No: You have no clear idea of the key features of an academic essay at university; you had the impression that an academic essay would be much the same as any other kind of piece of written work. Use this handout to find out more about the key features that make a good academic essay at university.


Do you know how to undertake research for an essay and have a good idea about what types of information are needed for an academic essay?
Yes: You know how to research an academic essay and are confident that you know what to look for when researching an essay.
No: You are not particularly sure what type of information you should search for when writing an essay at university level. Use this handout for basic ideas on how to research for an essay. You might also want to look at two of our other guides, on Research and on Critical Reading for extra help.

Are you sure you know how to develop an argument in an academic essay in a critical way that will answer the essay question?
Yes: You are confident that you know how to structure an argument in an essay answer to show good critical analysis of the subject area.
No: You are unsure of what structure an academic essay should take and are not sure what is meant by developing an argument in a critical way.

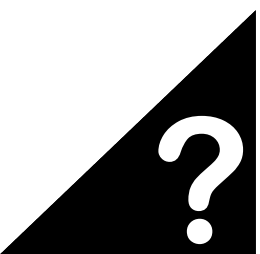
How did you do?



If you answered mostly ‘**yes**’ then you probably will have no problems writing an academic essay that would achieve a good grade. However, the handout might give you further ideas about planning, structuring and writing an essay.



If you answered mainly ‘**no**’ to the above questions then this handout will give you invaluable information about planning, structuring and writing a critically analytical academic essay.



Researching and writing an essay:

Constructing a good essay cannot be done the night before and will take a bit of effort.

Stage 1:

- First break down the essay question into its main parts – the instruction words and each of the main subjects it includes – and work out what you are expected to do for each part.
- Pay attention to the instruction words. Instructions you will often see in essay tasks include: 'discuss', 'compare and contrast' and 'critically examine'. Make sure you have checked what instruction words are being used and have a very clear idea of what they mean and what you are being asked to do.
- You can start to think about the subject that the essay will be about. You can start to do this even if you know little or nothing about the subject at this early stage. For example, even without knowing much (or anything) about the subject, you can make some sensible decisions about how to start your research. Often, you will find yourself heading to general textbooks to find definitions of key terms and suggestions for further reading.

Stage 2:

- Write a 'shopping list' of information you need, such as definitions of key terms and descriptions of main theories.
- If you have started out knowing little or nothing about the essay's subject, do not be afraid to start your research with really basic sources – that way you can build your knowledge up in sensible stages.
- You might also find during your research that you add new topics to your 'shopping list' as you discover gaps in your knowledge and understanding. You might also be able to take some off as if you discover that some of your original ideas were not as relevant to the essay subject as you had originally thought.

Stage 3:

- Access the Virtual Library and the library catalogue and do some serious searching in the book catalogue and through the electronic journals for information, using the topics on your 'shopping list' as your basic keywords. Think carefully about how you can use those keywords and other criteria (such as date of publication if you only want the most up-to-date information, for instance) to stop the catalogue and journal databases suggesting more resources than you could cope with.
- Once you have pulled together enough material to answer the question you can write a rough essay plan.

Stage 4:

- From your rough plan you can write drafts of your final essay answer. The first draft should focus on getting the structure right, in the second draft should you should focus on checking grammar and spelling and a final draft you would concentrate on referencing.

The Structure of an academic essay.

Introduction:

This should comprise about five to ten percent of the essay. The introduction should inform the reader how you intend to tackle the essay question. It is a good idea to write this last once you have written the rest of the essay. It can be best to make this the section you write last.

The main section:

This answers the essay question and comprises roughly eighty percent of the essay. This part should be structured into sections and paragraphs that contain descriptions, definitions and argument to complete the task your tutor set.

Each paragraph should deal with a separate topic or idea; this section may typically have topic paragraphs dealing with the following:

- Introduce idea (definition, description or argument).
- Supporting evidence.
- Discuss in relation to essay question.
- Conclude with final point about idea.

The conclusion:

This should come last in the essay and should constitute about ten to twelve percent of the essay.

Here you should:

- Restate the question and say how you answered it.
- Sum up the main points you made.
- Discuss implications or make recommendations.
- Not introduce new ideas or evidence.

